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Knowing History and Knowing Who We Are

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David McCullough was born in 1933 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was educated there and at Yale. Author of *John Adams*, *Truman*, *Brave Companions*, *The Path Between the Seas*, *Mornings on Horseback*, *The Great Bridge* and *The Johnstown Flood*, he has twice received the Pulitzer Prize and twice the National Book Award, as well as the Francis Parkman Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. His next book, *1776*, will be published in May 2005.



The following is an abridged transcript of remarks delivered on February 15, 2005, in Phoenix, Arizona, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar on the topic, "American History and America's Future."

Harry Truman once said the only new thing in the world is the history you don't know. Lord Bolingbroke, who was an 18th century political philosopher, said that history is philosophy taught with examples. An old friend, the late Daniel Boorstin, who was a very good historian and Librarian of Congress, said that trying to plan for the future without a sense of the past is like trying to plant cut flowers. We're raising a lot of cut flowers and trying to plant them, and that's much of what I want to talk about tonight.

The task of teaching and writing history is infinitely complex and infinitely seductive and rewarding. And it seems to me that one of the truths about history that needs to be portrayed – needs to be made clear to a student or to a reader – is that nothing ever had to happen the way it happened. History could have gone off in any number of different directions in any number of different ways at any point along the way, just as your own life can. You never know. One thing leads to another. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Actions have consequences. These all sound self-evident. But they're not self-evident – particularly to a young person trying to understand life.

Nor was there ever anything like the past. Nobody lived in the past, if you stop to think about it. Jefferson, Adams, Washington – they didn't walk around saying, "Isn't this fascinating, living in the past?" They lived in the present just as we do. The difference was it was their present, not ours. And just as we don't know how things are going to turn out for us, they didn't either. It's very easy to stand on the mountaintop as an historian or biographer and find fault with people for why they did this or didn't do that, because we're not involved in it, we're not inside it, we're not confronting what we don't know – as everyone who preceded us always was.

Nor is there any such creature as a self-made man or woman. We love that expression, we Americans. But every one who's ever lived has been affected, changed, shaped, helped, hindered by other people. We all know, in our own lives, who those people are who've opened a window, given us an idea, given us encouragement, given us a sense of direction, self-approval, self-worth, or who have straightened us out when we were on the wrong path. Most often they have been parents. Almost as often they have been teachers. Stop and think about those teachers who changed your life, maybe with one sentence, maybe with one lecture, maybe by just taking an interest in your struggle. Family, teachers, friends, rivals, competitors – they've all shaped us. And so too have people we've never met, never known, because they lived long before us. They have shaped us too – the people who composed the symphonies that move us, the painters, the poets, those who have written the great literature in our language. We walk around everyday, everyone of us, quoting Shakespeare, Cervantes, Pope. We don't know it, but we are, all the time. We think this is our way of speaking. It isn't our way of speaking – it's what we have been given. The laws we live by, the freedoms we enjoy, the institutions that we take for granted – as we should never take for granted – are all the work of other people who went before us. And to be indifferent to that isn't just to be ignorant, it's to be rude. And ingratitude is a shabby failing. How can we not try to know about the people who have made it possible for us to live as we live, to have the freedoms we have, to be citizens of this greatest of countries in all time? It's not just a birthright, it is something that others struggled for, strived for, often suffered for, often were defeated for and died for, for us, for the next generation.

Character And Destiny

Now those who wrote the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia that fateful summer of 1776 were not superhuman by any means. Every single one had his flaws, his failings, his weaknesses. Some of them ardently disliked others of them. Every one of them did things in his life he regretted. But the fact that they could